

My Dad had Secrets

Belmont is where I grew up. It's a small village on the side of the North Downs, a little way south of the town of Sutton.

You'll never see or hear a single word from me against immigration. I love immigration. I owe my very existence to immigration. My dad came to England from Canada and my mum came to England from Ireland and they would never have met each other if they hadn't both arrived in the same country at the same time.

Also, it is great and wonderful and marvellous to have different sides to your gene pool, cultural influences from different places. It makes you broader in your outlook, less of an inbred, less of a monoculture, less of the narrow straight.

I wasn't "born and bred". I was born and then I grew up. No-one has ever accused me of having any breeding. Farm animals are "bred". I grew and learned.

My mum told me a story about my grandad. They lived in the town of Birr, in County Offaly, Ireland.

When my grandad was young, this would be in the beginning years of the 20th Century, he went out with some of the other young men to cut down a tree in the forest. While they were there an accident happened with the axe and my grandad cut his hand badly.

The other lads bound up the bloody hand with a cloth and left my grandad propped against a tree with a bottle of whisky while they went into town to fetch a doctor. My mum said my grandad always told it this way: While he was leaning against that tree with massive blood loss and pouring a bottle of whisky down his throat all the little people, the leprechauns, came out to dance in a ring, right in front of his eyes.

The interesting thing to me about this is that the story still delights the imagination, in spite of the fact that seeing visions in those circumstances is pretty unsurprising. It's still a good story. Well, I like it anyway.

After that my grandad recovered and, eventually, was called up to fight in the First World War, the Great War, the war to end all wars.

He got caught by the drifting residue of a mustard gas attack and became a permanent invalid.

My mother nursed him throughout the rest of his life. As a young girl she once got her hand caught in a hand-cranked machine for chopping meat. She didn't lose any fingers but she occasionally talked of the horror of that incident throughout her life. Sometimes people carry a psychic wound long after the physical wound is healed.

My mum had that memory and my dad was missing part of a finger and part of a thumb. I don't know why there's a weird theme of hand injuries connecting the lives of my dad, my mum and my granddad. There just is. I have dyspraxia and had numerous accidents in my childhood. I have hand cramps and strange neurological glitches which, I have no doubt, are at least partly inherited.

My other granddad was Scottish. He went out from Renfrewshire to Canada in the 19th Century and my dad was born in Ontario in 1904. He was 18 years older than my mum. He was 49 years old when I was born in 1953.

My mother went to a Catholic school where the nuns would beat her with a stick for such trivial offences as spelling mistakes.

My father was born in Ontario, Canada in the year 1904. He was only 10 years of age when the Great War broke out and 12 years old when the USA joined the war. He was 20 in 1924 and there is a photo of him looking smart and handsome in a good quality 1920s suit. He looks like an actor in a gangster movie.

My dad could remember the days of prohibition and Americans coming over the border to buy booze. Travelling any distance necessary to get a taste of the hard stuff. He remembered the days of alcohol being smuggled back into America in the running-board of the car.

It wasn't easy to get my dad to talk about his past but he did reminisce sometimes in a vague and dreamy way. I do know that during the depression era of the 1930s he travelled across North America like a hobo, hopping freight trains, searching for a chance of work. And he found work of various kinds including logging, lumberjacking and that sort of thing. He also worked in roadside diners and hash houses as a short order cook. He met my mother in England. She had come over along with her brothers who had wanted to get into the war against Hitler and had come over the water from Ireland and joined up in the RAF.

My dad arrived in England as a sailor in the Canadian merchant navy.

In fact dad was below decks as a boiler stoker on a ship called the Europa which had been a Danish pleasure cruise ship sailing up and down the eastern coast of North America until the Nazis invaded Denmark and then she was claimed by the Canadian government for the war effort.

The Europa sailed to Scotland in November of 1940 with a large number of Canadian troops on board. The soldiers disembarked at Greenock and the ship sailed to Liverpool in December. My dad was in Liverpool in December 1940 when the Europa was bombed by the Luftwaffe and subsequently drydocked. During the next three months the ship was bombed again and again until she was beyond repair.

My dad, with no ship to return to, was in Liverpool during wartime, in civilian clothes and at a loose end. One day a woman on a street corner, handing out white feathers to men in

civvies, gave a verbal insult and handed one of these symbols of cowardice to my dad, who promptly hit her. She called a policeman.

My dad explained who he was, which ship he was with, his journey across the Atlantic dodging submarines, the bringing of the Canadian Army to Scotland, the bombing of his ship and, finally, the handing to him of the white feather.

This story was told to me when I was a little kid but it became especially meaningful to me in the 1980s when the feminist movement in England was going through a Matriarchalist phase and declaring that all wars were the fault of "boys with their toys". It was then that I remembered that wars were not only driven by boys with toys but also by women handing out white feathers.

Well, he got off with a caution but he was pretty upset about it and went off to join the Canadian Army himself, to get into a uniform and avoid any further accusations of cowardice.

So my dad went from being sailor to being soldier and from boiler stoker to cook. All his old short order cook skills were put to work by the 48th Highlanders regiment. They were proud to be Scottish Canadians, wearing kilts and playing bagpipes.

However there is another bit to this story which I don't understand. While doing family tree research I found this travel card of my dad's:

Canadian Pacific Railway
Manifest
Family name: SMITH
Given name: Percy
Date: 1943
Serial No.: 115
British Merchant Marine Identity Card No. 39189
CLX No.: Montreal, Sept. 29/43
Section and subdivision: 3-3
Date of issue: 3-3
Transit Cert. No.: 454
Age: 39
Sex: M
Occupation: seaman
Last permanent residence: Belmont Surrey, England
Language or occupation: Eng.
Name and address of nearest relative or friend in country whence applicant came: Mrs. Anne (Wife) 26 Belmont Rd., Belmont, Surrey.
In transit foreign: In transit - 4 days
Purpose in coming and time remaining: AR-102-05-04
Handed to status: Sec. 105-9-C
Height: 5 ft 8 in
Complexion: fair
Hair: Sandy
Eyes: Blue
Tattoo: - both arms
Port of departure: HALIFAX
Ship: "Queen Elizabeth"
Date of departure: September 3rd.
Previous destination: Adm. transit
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, Immigration and Naturalization Service. Form 1-440 (Rev. 1941)

Now, I know that my dad switched from the Merchant Navy to the 48th Highlanders of the Canadian Army. There is no doubt about that. I've seen the photographs of my dad in his Highlanders uniform and there were various other mementos.

Nevertheless, the travel card is from 1943 and identifies my dad as the holder of British Merchant Marine ID card number 39189.

He was changing ships from the Queen Elizabeth to the S.S. Gullpool at Galveston, Texas. he was making an epic journey from England to Canada to a Canadian Pacific train to Detroit, Michigan to Galveston to cross the Atlantic again to invade Italy! My mum is clearly listed on the transit card as Mrs. Anne (wife) 28, Belmont Road, Belmont, Surrey.

It's a bit of a mystery. There is clear evidence of my dad being Merchant Navy, then a soldier, then back to "Merchant Marine" and crossing the Atlantic, then all the way through the U.S.A. from north to south and then crossing the Atlantic again. What the hell was he doing? It's a bigger journey than the Lord of the Rings! I'm very puzzled. My dad had secrets.